Ode to Mentoring: How Mentoring Relationships Contribute to Student Success

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First impressions are lasting impressions, which contributes to the stress of starting freshman year. As I approach graduation this spring, I vividly remember the impressions that were imprinted on me four years ago. From knocking on the door of the dorm room that would become home to meeting my best friend in the vegetarian line in the cafeteria, these memories instantly transport me back to times of insecurity, excitement, and discovery.

During that time, I distinctly remember meeting the two peer mentors who would guide me through the joyful and occasionally turbulent transition into college: Anna and Colleen. My own mentoring abilities are a product of the experiences I had with these two wonderful young women, and I partially attribute my success to their guiding words and actions. Anna, a sophomore performing arts student, was the student mentor in my First Year Experience freshmen orientation course and was my first point of contact at The University of Tampa. On our first day in orientation, she offered us candid advice that addressed everything from time management to getting along with roommates. Anna was the first pillar of support that I had on campus, and she inspired me to pass the torch and try to be that pillar for future incoming freshmen. Colleen, a fellow International and Cultural Studies major, was a senior when we were paired in a mentoring relationship in President’s Leadership Fellows, a four-year leadership development program. Colleen was my idol: she traveled widely, knew everything about our shared major, and had an admirable drive to make the world a better place.

Like Colleen, I have discovered that one way of making the world a better place is to forge meaningful mentoring relationships with people in need. In a university setting, the people who are most in need of this type of connection are freshmen. Recognizing this need, my university has multiple programs installed to purposefully provide opportunities for freshmen and upperclassmen to establish mentoring relationships. It is through these programs, specifically the First Year Experience and President’s Leadership Fellows, that I met Anna and Colleen. It is also through these programs that I have transitioned into being a peer mentor, which has been perhaps my most fulfilling role as a student.

In the past two years, I have been a student mentor for three First Year Experience classes. With each class, I experience the challenge and delight of helping students navigate their first year at The University of Tampa. From helping my students move into their dorms to meeting with them individually during office hours held weekly throughout the year, I am proud to see them transitioning into independent young adults. As they enter sophomore year, I have encouraged my students to seek out major-specific mentors to help them navigate the next three years and ultimately prepare for their future careers.

I care deeply for all of my students, and as I reflect on these relationships three in particular stand out. Katelyn, a student in my current First Year Experience class, is also an International and Cultural Studies major. We have connected over everything from academics to relationships to life goals. She is a mentee and a friend and she will carry the torch of mentoring
a First Year Experience class after I graduate. Wyatt is in the same class and he attended the Florida Collegiate Honors Conference at my encouragement. This experience was a catalyst that led to his continued involvement in the honors program, which is a superb foundation for his academic career. Lastly, Micah is my assigned mentee in President’s Leadership Fellows. We meet at least once a month over coffee and it has been incredible to watch his growth over the past year. From ambitious yet directionless freshmen to confident campus leader who has discovered his calling for ministry, it is a privilege to hear his perspective and support him through the occasional growing pains.

Playing roles on both sides of the mentoring relationship has truly defined my personal and leadership development. Working with the aforementioned students and others is incredibly rewarding as I have the honor of not only seeing them change but also playing a small role in guiding them to success. Nothing is more satisfying than seeing fellow students blossom into their best selves. I strive to continually make good impressions with my mentees, one person at a time. I hope that these lasting impressions will make a positive impact on the next generation of Spartan mentors.